

Movement And Sensory Disorders In Today's Children

Dr. Peter Struck

The *Research Bulletin* has printed reports of ongoing research on brain formation and sensory development (see Volume 11, No. 2, June 1997 issue) on "New Health Problems of Children and Youth" for the University of Bielefeld, Germany, and "Research Into Changes in Brain Formation" by Michael Kneissle.

The following is an excerpt from studies by Professor Dr. Peter Struck, published in "*Yesterday's Education, Today's Pupils and Tomorrow's Schools*," Hanser Verlag, Munich, 1997.

Dr. Struck's commentary on contemporary German society and its influence on children's development echoes concerns which many Waldorf educators have expressed, both here in North America and throughout the world.

Until recently, schools have trusted that the child was being raised primarily in the home, and that there was a division of labor between the family, which raised the child, and the school, which educated the child.

This assumption holds true for fewer and fewer children. Many are growing up with a lack of intimate relationship, sensory experience, movement, play, and speech. Lacking both the benefits of adult care and the challenges of childhood, many six-year-old children are not yet developmentally ready to begin school.

There are specific developmental stages for the unfolding of a child's capacities. At particular age periods, the development of motor skills, language acquisition, and visual and auditory competence must be taken seriously and intensely fostered. If such development does not occur at the proper age, then with great effort the deficiency can be compensated for later, but it can never be completely overcome.

Elementary school-age children who have too seldom run and jumped, who have had insufficient opportunity to play on a swing or in the mud, to climb and to balance, will have difficulty walking backwards. They have a corresponding difficulty with counting backwards. They lag behind in arithmetic and appear to be clumsy and stiff. These children cannot accurately judge strength, speed, or distance; and thus they are more accident-prone than other children.

Children who grow up without the presence of siblings or their father, who do not have playmates, and who do not have enough tactile experience, have difficulty becoming accustomed to social or emotional

intimacy. The senses used in physical intimacy (touch, muscular coordination and sense of balance) are weakened through the lack of sufficient stimulation. Because their bodies have not been sufficiently held by someone else, they are unstable; such children thus have behavior problems. In her book, "Hold Me Real Close," Roswitha Defersdorf suggests providing such unstable children with external "holding" by taking them in one's arms for a long time, or even by pressing them to the floor or wall.

Among too many children who sit-at home and watch television, their "distance senses" are also diminished through a permanent overdose of visual and nonverbal auditory stimulation. Their thresholds of perception are shifted through the too-frequent consumption of quick-changing, action-packed colored images in cartoons and feature films. The result: black-and-white movies, still pictures, blossoming plants and landscapes provide insufficient stimulation and thus can no longer really be perceived.

Beginning in the second year of life, many children watch television regularly and extensively. Usually, this is not their favorite activity; they would prefer to rough-house with Daddy, cuddle and chatter with Mommy, play with siblings, or build something with friends; but television is their second-most favorite activity. At age two or three, when they are already "parked" in front of the television for hours at a time by their stressed and over-burdened parents, these children do not yet have the ability to understand the language of television at all. They learn to orient themselves exclusively to the picture. At a later age, however, when they become able to understand the language, they do not switch their sensory receptors.

Today, many children enter school with diminished sensory abilities; their perception and concentration are weak. They are awkward, have difficulty handling materials appropriately, lack language skills, are weak in arithmetic, and are clumsy. They cannot sense when someone is standing behind them. Their field of vision is limited to 70 degrees the normal range of vision would be approximately 200 degrees. These children cannot easily learn to ride a bicycle or to roller-skate, because they cannot balance, move in a circle or backwards. They are accident-prone, and cannot gauge the strength or direction of a friendly pat, which often unintentionally backfires into an overpowering slap.

Backyards covered up with concrete, streets over-parked with cars, and cramped living quarters rob children of space for growing. Architects provide 12 square meters of space for every car, but only six square meters for each child. In 1979, 22% of all German children no longer played outside; in 1995, the proportion had already reached 55%.

Today, city-kids sit out their childhood in an easy chair in front of the television, in front of the computer, in the car, in the school, and with homework; two-thirds of all school children listen to music droning from gigantic boom boxes, Walkmen and Diskmen. Among elementary school age children, one in three already possesses his or her own television, and one in five his or her own computer.

One in ten adolescents already suffers hearing loss; 60% of the children entering school have poor posture, 35% are overweight, 40% have poor circulation, 38% cannot adequately coordinate their arms and legs, and more than 50% lack stamina for running, jumping, and swimming. The Hamburg Center for Child Development alone, directed by pediatrician Inge Flehmig, annually treats 4,000 children who have movement and sensory disorders.

As early as the 1940's, Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget recognized that a child's physical movement is the basis for cognitive, social and emotional development. If one does not develop a physical sense of balance, then one also has a problem with mental equilibrium. Problems in movement correspond to delayed language development. To the same extent that development of the senses is impaired, the development of intelligence is interrupted, and learning is hindered. A society that does not promote the sensory development of its younger generation at the same time diminishes its overall intellectual capacity.